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ABSTRACT

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 emphasizes the placement of people in jobs as the first step in the welfare reform process rather than the development of basic and job skills. This has forced adult and vocational educators to rethink the role their programs can play in welfare reform. The move to de-emphasize education and training in the welfare reform act is more than a little ironic in view of the fact that the research on welfare-to-work programs continues to confirm that the most effective welfare-to-work programs share a balanced approach that mixes job search, education, job training, and paid and unpaid work experience. When developing programs for welfare recipients, adult and vocational educators must create ways of developing balanced programs while still meeting the requirements of the legislation. Although activities to improve basic skills are important, they should be provided as part of a comprehensive program designed to develop employability. Successful basic skills components include the following qualities: clear concept of participants' educational and other needs; support for teachers' efforts to innovate and experiment in the classroom; and sufficient funding to implement innovative ideas. (Contains 18 annotated references.) (MN)

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Welfare Reform:
What's at Stake for Adult and Vocational Education
Trends and Issues Alerts

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TRENDS AND ISSUES ALERTS
by Susan Imel 1998
ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

Welfare Reform: What's at Stake for Adult and Vocational Education

Although adult and vocational education has been linked with welfare reform since the Family Support Act of 1988, passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996 radically changed the environment for welfare recipients and the educators who serve them. The 1996 welfare reform law emphasizes "work first"—placing people in jobs as the first step in the welfare process—rather than the development of basic and job skills. It also limits the time that a family can receive cash assistance (Nathan 1997; Strawn 1995). Thus adult and vocational educators are having to rethink the role their programs can play in welfare reform (Strawn 1995). This *Alert* highlights some trends and issues involved in helping welfare recipients acquire literacy skills and prepare for work and what adult and vocational education programs can do to meet these needs.

A study (Barton and Jenkins 1995) of the literacy skills of welfare recipients concluded that "in the adult population as a whole, the likelihood of being on welfare goes up as literacy levels go down; the two are intertwined" (p. 3). Consequently, more than a little irony exists in the move to deemphasize education and training in the 1996 welfare reform act. According to Strawn (1995), however, that shift had already begun in state Job Opportunities and Basic Skills programs prior to 1996. Furthermore, a synthesis of research on welfare-to-work programs (Strawn 1997) revealed that neither programs emphasizing job-search strategies nor those focusing on adult education had long-term effectiveness in increasing participants' earnings and job tenure. Instead, "the most effective welfare-to-work programs share a balanced approach that mixes job search, education, job training, and paid and unpaid work experience" (ibid., p. [2]).

In addressing the trend toward job-search programming for welfare recipients, adult and vocational educators must create ways of developing programs that combine these elements while still meeting the requirements of the 1996 act. Successful programs have the following characteristics: comprehensive, individualized services; a consistent focus on employment; close relationships with local employers; rapid skill development through time-intensive training; high expectations for participation (ibid.); and developed collaboratively with all stakeholders in the work force development arena (D'Amico 1997).

Although activities to improve basic skills are important, they should be provided as part of a comprehensive program designed to develop employability (Strawn 1997). Successful basic skills components include the following qualities: a clear concept of participants' educational and other needs, support for teachers' efforts to innovate and experiment in the classroom, and sufficient funding to implement innovative ideas (Quint, forthcoming, cited in D'Amico 1997). The following resources can be consulted for further information about the implications of the welfare reform act of 1996 for adult and vocational education programs and for examples of how some programs are addressing the challenges posed by the act.

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Resources

Barton, P. E., and Jenkins, L. *Literacy and Dependency: The Literacy Skills of Welfare Recipients in the United States.* Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1995. (ED 385 775)

Used data from the 1992 National Adult Literacy Survey to examine the literacy proficiency of individuals who received forms of public assistance during the 12 months prior to the study. Found a positive relationship between literacy level and the likelihood of holding a job.

Bryan, K. S., and Morse, S. "Education and Training: The Path Out of Poverty for Women." *AAUW Outlook*, Summer 1995, pp. 19-24. (ED 382 788)

Outlines the position of the American Association for University Women that advocates education and training as the crucial key to preventing and ending poverty for all girls and women. Argues against speeding up the transition to the work force at the expense of education and training.

Bush, A. "Replacing Welfare in Wisconsin." *Hudson Briefing Paper.* Indianapolis, IN: Hudson Institute, July 1996. <http://www.hudson.org/wpc/articles/replcwel.htm>

Provides an overview of "Wisconsin Works" (W-2), a work-based system of public aid providing services, subsidies, and opportunities to help parents establish their own means of support, primarily through work, and then help them maintain long-term self-support.

D'Amico, D. *Adult Education and Welfare to Work Initiatives: A Review of Research, Practice and Policy.* Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy, 1997.

Examines issues faced by the literacy field as a result of welfare changes instituted in 1996 and attempts to clarify the role of adult education in moving individuals from welfare to work by situating the findings of studies that examine the impact of adult education on large groups of public assistance recipients within the lives of learners, the economic context in which they seek work, and the workplaces in which they practice their literacy skills.

Etindi, D.; Bush, A.; and Kaye, L. "Lessons from CETA: Caveats to Consider in Operating Publicly Funded Jobs Programs." Indianapolis, IN: Hudson Institute, January 1997. <http://www.hudson.org/wpc/articles/ceta.htm>

Provides a short background of the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (CETA), discusses generally agreed-upon views of what went wrong with its public service components, and draws lessons from the CETA experience for states currently implementing the PRWORA.

Filipczak, B. "It Takes a Campus." *Training* 34, no. 11 (November 1997): 58-62, 64-65.

Reports on a South Bend, Indiana, public-housing project designed to get its residents off welfare and into jobs. One of 25 housing developments nationwide that the Department of

Housing and Urban Development (HUD) designated as "Campus of Learners" in Fall 1996, the project provides training in both hard and soft skills.

Hull, G., ed. ***Changing Work, Changing Workers: Critical Perspectives on Language, Literacy, and Skills***. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997.

Argues that discussions about the role of literacy in the workplace are often based on largely unquestioned beliefs that workers are deficient in basic literacy skills and that there are clear links among illiteracy, poor job performance, and the economy. "Perspectives from the Classroom" examines adult basic education and vocational classrooms that help learners transition into work and/or improve their basic skills. "Perspectives from the Factory Floor" presents research about work processes and new technologies, about the relationship between literacy and language use and different forms of work organization, and about how people experience work and deal with unemployment.

"Lessons from Five State Welfare Reform Initiatives." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 1997. <http://www.urban.org/periodcl/prr25_3d.htm>

Presents a synopsis of a study that analyzed the major implementation and operational issues encountered by state welfare reform demonstration projects in Colorado, Iowa, Michigan, Utah, and Vermont. Includes a series of policy-related lessons learned.

Lichter, D. "Human Capital and Poverty in Rural America." ***Pathways from Poverty Educational Network***. University Park, PA: Northeast Regional Center for Rural Development, 1996. (ED 406 081)

Questions whether education and training are the solutions to poverty and welfare dependency, especially in rural areas. Provides information to support the position that rural poverty results from the shortage of good jobs rather than a shortage of good workers.

McDonnell, E. T. "Welfare to Work Just Got Tougher: Advocates Needed." In ***Adults in Transition***, edited by M. A. Wolf and M. A. Leahy. Washington, DC: American Association for Adult and Continuing Education, 1998.

The educational dilemma of a welfare recipient who finds her way into the mainstream is presented. In the context of the new welfare reform legislation, the author uses a case study to underline the need to continue advocating for education for economic self-sufficiency.

Nathan, R. P. "The Newest New Federalism for Welfare: Where Are We Not and Where Are We Headed?" ***Rockefeller Reports***, October 30, 1997.

Deals with the federal-state relationship under welfare and what is termed a "second-order devolution" in which states are assigning more responsibility to local governments. Questions about the federal government's role in overseeing the implementation of the 1996 welfare reform law are raised.

New York State Education Department. "Welfare Reform: Roles that Education Can Play." Updated 9/17/97. Albany: NYSED, 1997. <http://www.nysed.gov/workforce/wfroles.html>

Lists issues posed by the federal welform legislation act of 1996 and proposes solutions that can be implemented by the education and vocational rehabilitation system.

Reuys, S. "The Economies of SCALE: Exploring the Impact of Career Centers on ABE Programs." 1996. (ED 401 403)

The negative impact of recent changes in the welfare and work force development systems on adult basic education programs and their students is examined by a literacy education provider in Massachusetts.

Rose, N. E. ***Workfare or Fair Work: Women, Welfare, and Government Work Programs***. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

Traces the development of public assistance programs in the United States from the 1930s to the present, emphasizing the role of workfare programs in the growing impoverishment of women. Suggests replacing workfare programs with fair work programs and policies that respect individual dignity and give all people choices about combining caretaking work in the home with wage labor while maintaining an adequate standard of living.

Strawn, J. ***Implications of Welfare Reform for Workforce Development. Issue Brief***. Washington, DC: National Governors' Association, 1995.

Reviews what will happen to adult education and work force development systems under state and federal welfare reforms. The implications of these changes for policy makers in adult education and work force development are suggested.

Strawn, J. "Overview of Welfare-to-Work Research and Principles for More Effective Models." Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, November 25, 1997.

Using the results of research on job-search focused programs and adult education programs, this paper highlights findings and presents principles for creating welfare-to-work strategies that increase recipients' earnings power.

"Where Wisconsin Goes, Can the World Follow?" ***Economist*** 345, no. 8041 (November 1, 1997): 25-26.

Summarizes the "Wisconsin Works" program, a welfare program based on the premise that the poor should no longer be entitled to benefits and that all welfare participants will work. Concludes by describing why the Wisconsin program may not work in other states and communities.

Zargari, A. "Partnership between Vocational Institutions and Welfare Programs." Paper presented at the American Vocational Association Convention, Cincinnati, OH, December 5-8, 1996. (ED 403 432)

Reports on the results of a study that assessed the basic skills of enrollees in the welfare department's job training program and basic skill needs relative to the qualifications expected of high school graduates. Includes recommendations that can be used by vocational-technical education programs in designing job training programs for welfare recipients.

Web Resources

A list of welfare reform-related web resources can be found at <http://www.nysed.gov/workforce/wfnet.html>

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